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## “Homo Europaeus”? A comparative analysis of advertising

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**Abstract** – The narrative repertoire of advertising is the only place where producer and consumer, sender and receiver negotiate a common identity format. The analysis of advertising in European countries shows that there is no such thing as the Homo Europaeus, but that there are two major continental blocks: a North-European one, using monochronic advertisements, narrative formats based on relationships and soft-sell brand representation mechanisms, in which the context is more relevant than the product itself; in Southern Europe, on the other hand, we find polychronic advertising, narrative formats based on the idea of performance and mechanisms of representation of individual hard-sell products, in which the context loses its prominence.

**Keywords** – Advertising; storytelling; hard-sell / soft-sell; monochronic / polichronic societies; nationalism; life-narrative account.

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# **“Homo Europaeus”?**

## **A comparative analysis of advertising**

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### **1. Western selfie**

Many cross-culturalist scholars, social psychologists and comparatists argue that the West has a real autobiographical obsession: talking about our own narrative life (former US President Jimmy Carter, example of golden mediocrity, has written eight memorialist texts...), going on tv, being absorbed in instant messaging in everyday life, constantly updating our social network pages and so on.

Nowadays, in Euro-American cultures, everything is an autobiography – from the life of tv personality Barbara D’Urso to that of scientist Margherita Hack, to remain in Italy –, and the narratives seem to designate a subject (who plays simultaneously the role of narrator, main character, promoter and editor) to be the absolute managing director. The Auto-biographical Self’s new wave delights us with its narcissism. In the United States, “sharing time” is a regular activity in preschools, which takes place usually on Monday mornings. Throughout this activity children sit in a circle and narrate to classmates what happened to them during the weekend. (Wang). Sharing personal stories is an essential ingredient in everyday conversations, both in old Europe and in America: as Westerners, we are eager to tell our stories at least as much as we are fascinated by other people’s histories. This influences not only the construction of our own Self, but also the definition of the boundaries that separates our Ego from other Egos. Also, this determines the way – always target oriented – we manage our relationship (at work, family, with friends, etc.), but also the therapeutic functions that we generally assign to the sharing of life narratives. Freud could have been born only in Europe: sharing our failures, frustrations and traumas with others is a way to seek empathic proximity, get advice and social support, to find the origins of evil and relieve our individual pain.

This does not happen in eastern countries, where talking about or bringing attention to ourselves, may be socially inappropriate. In fact, East Asians are usually reluctant to share their life narratives, nor do they encourage others to do so. Even Asian politicians and celebrities avoid writing about their own lives: Mahatma Gandhi had to fight for long against the idea of writing an autobiography. The idea could have been politically favourable, however a novel about himself would contradict his values of modesty, humility and social equality.

When people of Asiatic origin narrate their own life story, or during a casual conversation, they tend to focus mostly on elements that are external to the subject of the story. This happens because in Asian culture the Self is defined mostly by social status, leaving little space to detailed personal stories, which could be revealing of a unique self. Social relationships are generally unconditional, deontic (i.e. as linguistic philosophers say, ruled by sense of duty), prescriptive and stable, and require a narrative “maintenance”. In fact, fostering social relationship through personal histories could be useless, inappropriate or even pernicious.

Given this our question would be: Does advertising – which is not the mere promotion of goods and services, but a proper communicative activity with its language that has the purpose

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to persuade and catch attention (Cannon et al. 2000; Ogilvy 2001) – confirm the findings of psychologists, narratologists, neuroscientists, and cross-culturalist scholars?

Entering the world of advertising and limiting our analysis to Europe to capture any faults, collisions or isomorphisms in our identity is the only path to find an answer. The reason we have chosen advertising as our study field is that since the 1950s, with the advent of tv, the morphology of advertising has changed, growing into more complex forms. After the diffusion of the internet and its digital platforms in the nineties, it became even more experimental. Nevertheless, it is the explosion of commercials – thanks to broadcasting tv – that paradoxically made advertising lose its commercial influence. That is because the efficacy of the message is inversely proportional to the number of spots of other products in the same time slot. As in every form of communication, losing its commercial purpose has determined a progressive aestheticism of advertising. As a result, advertising has entered the area of artistic matters, becoming a field of experimentation in which the Self has found an ideal arena of eutrophication (Cheng; Crawford).

## **2. Life narratives of advertising**

For the reasons illustrated above, the world of advertising offers an extraordinary narrative potential and a number of stories bigger than those offered by more traditional aesthetic domains, such as literature and cinema. The themes of advertising, – fictional or true, like autobiographies and self-referential stories of testimonials and celebrities – have the purpose of keeping together what is known and unknown, right and wrong, repeatable and innovative.

Storytelling is essential for the functioning of the human mind since all information and knowledge are organised and stocked into narrative structures with a casual and chrono-logical dimension. That is the reason why advertising became desirable for the scientific community.

If we are wondering if there is a specific European advertising or if there are strong differences into the European cultural world, the answer could be complex. For a few years now, social psychology has started to study the way in which the sense of belonging and self-definition arise in narrations. The expression “life-narrative account” explains how individuals build their own essential story with pre-formed plots, which can give a meaning to what they have experienced and what they will experience.

Are there narrative schemes that are common not only to national-states, as the nineteenth-century positivists wanted, but also to multi-lingual macro-aggregates and complex constitutions such as Europe or its geo-cultural portions? The social Psychologist Dan McAdams gives a positive answer to this question, at least for what concerns the Northern Euro-American area. Mc Adams argues that recent European history can be summarized in an Original Tale that the author calls “redemption narrative,” based on the idea of a progressive redemption of the individual from a difficult past.

The stories we tell or listen to – novels, commercials, films, life stories as well – and the way we tend to shape our existence as European citizens, would essentially go through certain stages: from the one in which, during childhood, the protagonist experienced injustices, personally or as a witness, to the stage of adulthood, where further negative events are faced by the protagonist as “actions of release and redemption” in a perspective of confidence in the future, especially for future generations (McAdams and Guo).

Stories, particularly those born in the recreational area of advertising, ritualize the past and set the future. Those are memories of an “abstract future” and that is the reason why scientists are so interested in them. In Europe, advertising would highlight a “redemption” in terms of a sliding from the individual to the community; therefore, through recoveries, growth, learning, the concern for the well-being of future generations would remain high.

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Social Psychologists find that formats like this are linked to the founding myths of Euro-zone. In fact, the current adoption of narrative formats related to international non-profit organizations, or family structures, or to the acquisition of technological tools to anticipate the future, explain the attempt of narrative to heal wounds and rewrite the borders of European identity. This occurs in Ikea advertising, in those of organic food or cancer prevention, but also in literature, from Ken Follett to Rowling's novels where magic serves as an instrument of redemption as well. As in a sort of manifesto of a solidarity-oriented individualism focused on social welfare, Europeans describe, in an extraordinarily similar way, their discovery of “being special” and the simultaneous revelation of other people suffering.

### **3. Horizontal Individualism, Vertical Individualism**

Is this a uniform situation? Not entirely. It is evident that if the distinct socio-cultural blocks in the world – the West oriented towards individualism and the East towards cross-personalism – derive their vocation to blending from globalization, this also occurs within each single geo-cultural block (Nisbett and Miyamoto). In Europe, for example, Mediterranean countries such as Belgium and France, can be placed in a transitional stage between Asia and the Northern Europe countries influenced by Protestant and Anglo-Saxon culture.

Generally, the importance of the individual Self increases as we move from East to West and decreases from the North to the South of Europe; but there are regions of mixings and cultural overlaps. Among the countries of Mediterranean Europe, Spain is surely the one where the language of advertising seems to be oriented toward individualism, more than in the American one. A recent study has proved how the integrity and the welfare of the group are more popular values in US advertising (the USA are considered the most individualistic nation in the world) than in the Spanish one (16% vs 2%) (Pineda et al.).

This is surprising since Spain, which has a strong attachment to familiar aggregations, is placed in a middle position between the extreme poles of individualism and collectivism. Moreover, Spanish people favour a horizontal model of individualism (where the emphasis is on the equality and similarity of individuals, who therefore do not claim to be unique). This isn't the case of the US, where a vertical model of individualism is preferred (with the emphasis being placed on hierarchies and the acceptance of inequalities by individuals who perceive themselves as independent and self-affirming). It is paradoxical that in Spanish advertisements (published in *El Pais* between 2014 and 2015), the emphasis on the uniqueness of individual action, competitiveness, leadership, personal ambition, individual benefits, satisfaction etc. prevailed much more than in US ones. The Spanish advertising messages spread the importance of being different, emerging above the others and making success visible. In the United States there is greater leverage on the achievement of personal goals, on economic power and, eventually, on social prestige. The paradox revealed by advertising shows the rising of a form of vertical individualism in a country of traditionally horizontal individualistic culture. It seems that advertisement did not respect the cultural traditions of a territory and has the purpose of implanting, as an alternative, elements that radicalize or even contrast the native cultural elements.

Now, advertisements tell stories, and stories embrace popular imagination, real historical traditions, cultural artefacts and lifestyles. It seems that today about a quarter of the television commercials in Europe tell stories with a noticeable plot. An analysis conducted on advertisements that appeared between 2011 and 2012 showed that about half of a single commercial – lasting thirty second – shows an evident narrative approach. That is because stories allow the consumers to immerse themselves into the imaginative context of the advertisement and even being “transported” by them. It should be considered that when consumers interpret an advertisement based on a story, they map the information received

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according to some patterns recorded during their previous life experiences. Therefore, social experience acquired through advertising gains in the eyes of the user the meaning of multiple cognitive representations, which provide the basis for understanding new experiences or new narratives. By processing stories, we activate not only processes of understanding but also real experiences of mental simulation – which is what makes the impact of advertising on users relevant.

Today we are aware – thanks to the results of a test conducted between 2011 and 2012, involving 239 Europeans of various backgrounds aged between 18 and 65, 52% women and 47% men – that some individuals are more susceptible than others to being transported in the history of a commercial and therefore to be more influenced to buy a product. The results of this test have also shown that the difference in the inclination to transport does not depend on demographic features such as sex, age, education or geographic origin. The “transportability” and the empathic involvement in the narration is linked to an individual willingness to fictional simulations. Basically, certain individuals enjoy themselves more than others, and it is for this reason that advertising narratives with the highest emotional emphatic tone are those that circulate in European countries where the display of passions is more socially legitimized, particularly in Italy.

It seems that gender prejudices also have a retroactive effect on the decoding of advertisements. Polish researchers conducted a study in the United Kingdom and Poland with the aim to measure the impact of gender prejudice on the approval of advertising (Zawisza). Researchers used the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), based on commercials that are classified as emotionally oriented (the so-called ‘warmth’) or based on informative content (the so-called ‘competence’). Surprisingly the results revealed that, while in the UK the participants with a conservative political orientation preferred ‘orthodox’ advertising, in Poland the participants of equal political orientation preferred innovative and ‘heterodox’ advertising, which for example displayed a male househusband while cooking, or a businesswoman sitting at his desk. Why? The explanation provided by Zawisza and his collaborators highlights that the need of people who live in a social context where the social pressure to refuse prejudice is high, because they do not want to appear, in fact, injurious. This gives advertising the valuable function of releasing the individuals from the social habitat of their relevance: proof of it is that the British participants, living in an area traditionally freer from prejudice than Poland, have been reliable to traditional advertising.

### **4. “Gender-related” advertisement: the Scandinavian case study**

Does advertisement absorb and annihilate the scales of values, even recognizing the power to overturn them? If the answer is positive, perhaps could this be explained by the fact that the language of advertising is presumptuously atheist and used to employing any form of aestheticization to persuade its users to purchase? This is far from reality. It seems indeed that advertising is a place of collective communication in which cultural practices, life-styles and cognitive habits adopted in everyday life prevail over cultural values. Certain re-searchers have verified this with regard to Finnish advertising. Finland is a country that is basically matriarchal and ‘feminine’, however, in advertising prevails a type of male appeal, which involves the use of components such as heroism, assertiveness, material reward, success (Salman). In this sense, the advertising narratives are an enormous archive of innovative cultural practices protected from institutional dogmas and formal censorship, protected oases of ethical and cultural experimentation, that is the opposite of what they are generally believed to be.

The conclusions of some studies which have investigated the way men and women are represented in Swedish ads compared to those in the United States are equally interesting (Wiles and Tjernlund). Sweden was chosen because it is the first country in the world to have

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implemented a government policy to achieve gender equality. Long before the feminist movement emerged in North America and in the rest of Europe, the impulse for women's emancipation was present in the debate on gender roles in Sweden and in other Scandinavian countries, where in the 1980s a special secretariat of the Ministry of Labour was set up to ensure gender equality. Well, from a detailed collection of the advertisements appeared at the end of the 1980s in Swedish magazines such as *Golf Digest Sverige* (sport), *Manadstidningen Z* (free time), *Femina Manadens Magasin*, *Hemmets Veckotidning* and *Vecko Revyn* (fashion) it has emerged that advertisers in Swedish magazines were more likely to represent women while working (44.4%) than advertisers in the US (13.2%), whereas men in Sweden are more likely to be placed in a recreational setting (68, 6%), while in the American magazines the percentage is much lower (46.5%).

While in US advertising women are almost always represented as merely decorative, in Swedish advertising they are represented during recreational activities, within a family context and especially during high status professional activities. In short, advertising forces the reality and radicalizes it to the limit of mendacity, yet in a beneficial way. Women are portrayed in Swedish advertising while they work, and this reflects reality, whereas it is unlikely that men will be shown in a state of permanent unemployment, so to speak.

What does this study about advertising in Sweden teach us? First of all, that Europe – compared to a country that is very attentive to the problem, such as the USA – appears to be more advanced in some of its components in terms of gender equality; and that Europe was the first to point out the importance of advertising in attenuating, counteracting or, instead, feeding social prejudices and discrimination: a self-regulation body of advertising communication was instituted in Britain in 2005 (the Advertising Standard Authority), in the belief that this institution could reduce the serious consequences that a stereotypical communication in advertising may have on individuals, the labour market and social cohesion as well.

Based on the assumption that an advertising message is perceived and evaluated in different ways in different national contexts and depending on the cultural practices individuals are familiar with in a given territory, in recent years we have used advertising to understand the dynamics of a social group and the processes of transformation, variation or mitigation of the values. The GLOBE scale since 2010 has evaluated the impact of a specific cultural variables on the perception of advertising considering nine factors:

- 1) Assertiveness: the way in which individuals in a given culture are conflicting or aggressive in their relationship with others. Members of a society with high levels of assertiveness tend to actively control the environment and respect competition;
- 2) avoidance of uncertainty: the way in which members of a given society try to avoid risks through social norms, rituals and administrative practices;
- 3) power distance: the acceptance of hierarchies;
- 4) institutional collectivism: the way in which social organizations and institutions encourage the distribution of collective resources;
- 5) in-group collectivism: the level in which individuals express pride, loyalty and familiar or institutional cohesion;
- 6) gender equality;
- 7) orientation towards the future: levels of planning and investment;
- 8) orientation towards performance: the way in which a society rewards and encourages its members;
- 9) “human orientation”: the way in which individuals encourage and reward others for their loyalty and altruism (Diehl et al.).

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In this study by Diehl, it has emerged that advertising in Europe and in the United States – in this case the Western world appears to be cohesive – gives importance to the value of performance, in other words, the ability to act and to prevail over others. Also, the value of “human orientation” appears just as crucial, as in Europe the reputation of companies is no longer based solely on monetary results but also on their collaboration with charitable organizations. Perhaps it is for this reason that an advertisement of US Dell Computer claims that they will donate 50% of revenue from the sale of computers to a program that fights AIDS. But also, the Swiss Baume & Mercier, which declares to promote activities to improve the education of children, the struggle against cancer and the protection of the environment. And the German house Hugo Boss as well, who contributes to Unicef activities through the sale of a new fragrance.

Finally, Diehl highlighted the use of the value of orientation toward the future (particularly, in advertising of banks and financial institutions, especially in German culture) and the one of assertiveness, which is crucial in many European countries since an “assertive” behaviour raises the levels of self-esteem and the perception of having total control of the environment and reduces feelings of insecurity and vulnerability.

On the basis of these assumptions, it has been noted that the perception of high levels of assertiveness in an advertising message leads to a positive evaluation of the message, if the value that individuals in a given country give to assertiveness is higher. The study of Diehl and his collaborators, for example, has highlighted that the greatest number of assertive advertising is in continental Europe (Germany and France), while their number drastically decreases in Latin American countries (especially Argentina) and in Southern European countries such as Spain and Italy, where general insecurity and vulnerability toward the future attenuates the perception of control of the Self and on the environment, on which assertiveness is nourished.

## **5. Monochronic and polychronic models: stories with or without background**

However, what we are interested in is the Focus, which is the way we look at the world and represents what we decide to know and what we chose to ignore. The Focus is the conditions that makes knowledge possible and the purposes towards which all this move.

What is the point of view of the European populations of the North and the South, for instance? Because of cultural and religious traditions and lifestyles, scholars identify in the North a fluid (Baumanian-liquid) world of substances and constant masses of material, while in the South, a world of separate and distinct objects seems to prevail. In other words, where an Italian sees a statue, a Swedish will perceive a piece of marble, that is a substance-mass (Cheng). In short, compared to southern Europeans, northern Europeans have a holistic view of the world and a high perception of the “field”, especially the events in the background: they are less inclined to separate an object from the context and show an authentic “dependency from field,” according to which the perception of an object is influenced by the situation and the environment in which the object itself is located. This lead, in advertising, to a great emphasis on the brand, while in Southern Europe the product is more emphasized than the brand. In the North we adopt long-term narrative strategies, in the South the focus is on retail marketing instead. In this way similarly, causal attributions and the way of constructing a narration will markedly differ, because the North-Europeans tend to identify external causes (exo-causal factors) due to environmental factors, where the south-Europeans will tend to identify internal causes (endo-causal factors) due to emotions, intentions and individual desires.

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These differences are also found in advertising headlines; in the individualistic cultures of southern Europe the focus is on individual benefits and preferences (“Make your way through the crowd;” “I live, and with pleasure”), while in northern Europe the emphasis is more on the benefits for the community (“We have a system to put people closer to each other;” “Latest news: a partnership that really works”).

Nevertheless, Europe is not just a contraposition between North and South, Protestant countries and Catholic ones. Before getting back to European advertising, it is opportune to illustrate a crucial distinction proposed by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall. The author believed that every culture is primarily a system made to create, send, preserve and process information only in part through verbal language, but above all through spatial and temporal codes (Hall and Hall). In terms of time, Hall claims that there are two ways of conceiving and managing temporality in the world: monochronic time and polychronic time.

(a) In monochronic cultures – characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon area and countries such as Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway – time is unilinear, like a road that runs irreversibly from the past to the future. The North-Europeans are almost completely oriented towards the future even though their vision of the future is limited, or it refers to a near and predictable future, with a focus on novelty and change, while, on the other hand, attention to the past is left to the historians. Those who live in monochronic cultures consider time as a tangible, distinguishable and linear object to which a priceless value is recognized, to such an extent that it is treated as common currency (‘time is money’) that can be ‘spent’, ‘saved’, ‘wasted’ and ‘lost’. In these cultures, individuals act in a low-context logic, meaning that the context in which the conversation takes place, the setting and non-verbal messages as well are negligible elements, while explicit and verbal communication methods are preferred.

(b) On the contrary, individuals belonging to polychronic cultures, typical of the Mediterranean countries including Italy, Spain, part of France, Greece and part of the Slavic countries that face the Adriatic, have a circular conception of time, thus they tend to carry out several activities simultaneously and consequently and little weight is given to planning, since they consider time as an entity that is not entirely tangible.

Unlike the North-Europeans, the Mediterranean populations treat a ‘long time’ in terms of thousands of years or even an unlimited period, therefore they can accomplish many things at the same time and act in high-context social groups, which give great value to the information produced by the context, enhancing emotions, places and non-verbal communication.

In short, we have on one side a cold and rational North-Europe, which is unilinear, interpersonal and not inclined to empathy and emotions but rather to irony, nonsense and problem solving. On the other side we have a ludic and empathetic South-Europe, inclined to interior drama, individualism and autobiographical memory.

The advertisements of Northern Europe are much more time-oriented than those of Southern Europe. The latter are more like Chinese messages that advertise contemporary products, for example in the fast food sector. For example, McDonald's and similar “speed oriented” services, that characterize an up-to-date life standard, are perceived by Mediterranean consumers as a way to experience the cultural symbolism of the United States, ‘live an American experience’, dip in the atmosphere of the race to the Far West and not invest time in the consumption of food (slow food, in fact a dilatation of time). On the other hand, Northern Europe’s advertising spreads messages in which emerges the value of speed and time is represented in terms of ‘immediate effect’, ‘speed’, ‘efficiency’.

## **6. From the holistic brand narration to the analytical product narration**

The geo-cultural context has therefore been identified as a differential component of advertising. It can be said that the North-Europeans favour a so-called high-context model



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that values the setting in which something appears or happens. Doing so the attention goes to the meanings emerged from the context, the cognitive styles and the information already registered by individuals. Advertisements adapt to high context and consequently – Ikea demonstrates it, with the accurate description of a family context where relationships are more important than the single person – they give little importance to the information related to the single product.

The narration is indirect and uses stories already stored by the recipients, for example a recent Ikea’s television commercial shows the living room of an apartment on which many doors open, and each of them configures a story that is easily legible even though they’re not described: a couple that fights, an older married couple having fun during sex, a bunch of children playing “Cowboys and Indians,” etc.

On the other hand, in the low-context cultures – which are predominant in the Mediterranean countries and in central-southern Italy – nothing is taken for granted. Consequently, the advertisements are much richer in information, relationships are transitory and instrumental and the context, the location, and the non-verbal messages are negligible elements. In this case, the key elements are the structured messages, the detailed description of a product, the use of technical terms and logical arguments.

A study of the Department of Design, Communication and Media of the University of Copenhagen wanted to highlight the way McDonald’s readapted its web advertisements for multiple countries around the world. From this research has emerged that in high-context countries such Northern European ones the website drew attention to non-verbal communication, interpersonal relationships and a long-term time perspective, making an extensive use of animated images, collective scenes and very dynamic navigation in order to encourage the user to explore the site and link inner components to each other. On the contrary, in low-context countries, such as those of southern Europe, websites communicate using more verbal than visual language. Thus, the navigation windows appear as static, closed in themselves, and show, above all, individuals performing solitary activities (Würtz).

An example of high-context advertising is that – produced in 2007 by Perfetti Van Melle, an Italian company whose advertising core is Dutch – of Vigorsol chewing-gum. The spot begins with images of a forest on which looms a cloud of smoke and a small squirrel that from the top of a branch observes the threatening event. The wood is about to be devoured by the flames and humans are busy trying to extinguish the fire with great difficulty. So, our little hero extracts a packet of Vigorsol from the pouch, takes a gum and runs fast towards the tip of the branch. Here he stops standing on one leg and frees a thunderous fart, whereby an icy cloud spreads across the forest and imprisons the fire with ice. The farmers exult because their lands are safe and the squirrel, as if nothing has happened, slips into his den.

It is important to note that the commercial had great success in northern Europe, while in Italy, on the contrary, it was retired and then modified by substituting the fart with a powerful exhalation. The whole storytelling is high-context since everything is relational (the environment, the protection of business activities, the deference of labour and the “interpersonal” gratitude of farmers); the main character – the dominant Self – has a pivotal role, but only to solve a collective problem, certainly not for an inner desire to be a super-hero. This commercial does not provide any specific information about the product but reveals the narrative program of the brand; Perfetti Van Melle, a leading company in the world market that has acquired brands such as ChupaChups, equally refers to a youthful and globalized audience, which can be reached through ironic and anti-fraud codes of the censored advertising.

The sequences of the commercial – temporally limited and organised according to a monochronic model – refer to the implicit narrative background of the viewers (the routine of rural life, the endemic danger of fires for environmental protection, etc.) and, above all,

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convey an ironic narration, and by saying ‘ironic’ we mean a form of communication (to say the opposite of what one wants to communicate), which is the more effective, the more uniform is the audience to whom it is addressed. Irony can be used safely only in a high-context culture: the antiphrasis is aggregative, it reinforces norms and opinions already in force in a given social habitat, it compares different or even opposite images of the world, nevertheless it can be decoded if, and only if, the recipients previously know the meaning that the issuer of the advertising message is hiding.

In this regard, high-context North-European advertisings are soft-sell – according to a recent distinction (Haygood) – because they require a communication that uses the rhetoric force of analogy and allusion to bet on the isomorphism of intentions of both the producer and the consumer. They refer to the consumer not so much to inform him but mainly to satisfy his wishes. One promoter of this style of advertising was David Ogilvy (1911-1999), pioneer of advertising in the UK. He was the father of a communication centred on irony and on the fascination of visual elements, granting that he had to give up the rational advantages of the product (related for example to savings, efficiency or safety). In accordance with the high-context communication type, in English, Scandinavian and Dutch advertisements, the advertising of the products takes place through images and not through verbal narration or by showing the characteristics of the object. Thus, the visual component creates in the users that atmosphere and those mental associations that distinguish a brand from its competitors.

The tendency to enhance the context more than individuals explains, among other things, why advertising based on natural landscapes is much more successful in Northern Europe than in Mediterranean countries. We may think about the recent launch campaign for the Nissan “Infinity” in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. The spot consists in landscape sequences where there was no trace of the vehicle, which appears only at the end of the commercial. On the contrary, in Italy, the same “Infinity” was advertised (in 2017) through a series of rapid sequences in which the car is framed in all perspectives, both inside and outside, becoming in fact the undisputed main character of the advertising.

To understand how the opposite model of hard-sell advertising (Haygood) – typical of low-context society – works, it is useful to analyse a 2008 commercial promoting the “Marca”, a sports information newspaper which in Spain collects almost 3 million readers a day and is essentially the equivalent of the Italian *Gazzetta dello Sport*. The 30-second video shows football players performing actions that are definitely more representative of other sports (soccer players who take the ball with their hands, or swirl their arms like swimmers, or tackle each other like rugby players etc.). While we follow a soccer match we are simultaneously spectators of a series of other sporting events, whose name we read in a superscript: swimming, artistic gymnastics, billiards, athletics, tennis, weightlifting, volley-ball, cycling, horse riding, motorcycle competitions, rugby and football; the word *soccer* appears only at the end when a basketball player kicks a ball with his foot. A rhythmic eighteenth-century music drags the viewer through polychronic sequences; there is no logical beginning or end but only a circular flow of sports in random order. Even though, in this apparent disorder the commercial analytically describes all the sports treated by the advertised product.

But this is not all: the referential description is based on an extremely ergonomic and functional system where a soccer match is the essential plot – this sport occupies the largest space on the newspaper – but together with it, all the other sports appear as well, tangled in a blend of great sagacity. The sequences are clearly separated from each other and the editing is well exhibited, while within each sporting sequence the focus never goes to the context of the action or interpersonal action of several people, but on a single individual, who is marked by anomaly, bizarre gestures, a sudden transgression of the game rules or an act of creativity able to bring us out of the routine. In short, individuals appear only at the peak, so to speak, of their individualism, monads detached from a background that is totally irrelevant.

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The advertising of the *Marca* newspaper are polychronic and individualistic, referential and informative, directed towards hard-sell and ergonomic in the use of expressive tools. Also, this campaign is representative of the countries of Southern Europe, where the role of advertising is to convince consumers to buy a certain product, even putting the visual elements at the service of the consumer so that he understands the ways he can benefit from the product or service presented. This advertising style implies that the consumer's decisions are dictated by rationality, and for this reason refined layout, aesthetic rarefaction and narrative doodles are completely omitted because they are considered an obstacle to the efficacy of the message in terms of sales. In the 1940s the American Rosser Reeves was an important innovator of this method and father of the so-called *unique selling proposition*, a theory that has prospered also in Europe. According to this theory the advertising message must be limited to clarifying the advantages offered by the product (consumption/performance ratio, comfort, saving, eco-sustainability) and highlighting the unique-ness of these benefits, neglecting the brand or the company.

### 7. The early decay of the *homo europaeus*

However, these classifications should not make us think about a Europe cut in half, because advertisings are inclined in fact to bind into clusters of national identity, at least when this makes it possible to exploit the symbolic and associative resonances of a country to focus even more on the value of a product (gastronomy for France, footwear manufacturing for Great Britain, fashion for Italy, car industry for Germany, etc.).

The resources of nationalism, in terms of marketing and advertising, are particularly evident in countries such as Poland, which have only recently emerged from an identity deprivation caused by Soviet Union. An example could be a recent commercial of the Polish online sales company *Allegro*, entitled *English for Beginners* (2016) and successfully uploaded on the web (where it was viewed 2,765,000 times in more than a week). The spot shows an elder Polish man filling out an online order to buy an audio set to learn English. To practice during the day, he repeats English phrases and attaches post-it notes on objects, even on his dog, to remember their names in English, he watches English movies as well and then repeats the lines to a rubber duck while taking a bath. Well, just as you follow the actions of this willing Polish intent on learning the language of international communication, everything intentionally refers to the Polish national brand with iconic landscape, famous people's portraits, books about Polish liberation from the soviet oppression etc. (Kelly-Holme).

On the contrary: as national identities seem to lose value in favour of supranational and global institutions – whose influence is currently high, especially in consumption – advertising tends to exonerate users from this weakening of national identities by the symbolic use of nationalism, which became a real brand.

According to a recent study, in Poland, patriotism is more active in commercials than in the political world (Kelly-Holme), meaning that the weakening of the local element induces, by immune compensation, a sort of nationalization of lifestyle and consumer habits. It is interesting that some advertisements show references to national identity regardless of their commercial nature, in order to deliver feelings such as national pride and self-confidence to the Polish. For example, the recent advertising campaign by Tyski e Ducal breweries entitled “Polish inspire the world” represents an attempt to reinvigorate Polish pride, as well as that of the Biedronka supermarket chain, whose claim is We are a national team.

Similarly, National pride was the core element of the 2005 campaign “Poland, the heart of Europe” and of another one of 2008

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“A Country at the Crossroads,” whose aim was to create a positive self-perception of national identity. This campaign wanted to break the negative stereotypes related to the communist past, to the passion for vodka and to the inclination to radicalised Catholicism. Of course, the target of those advertising campaigns are foreign investors, to encourage them to invest in the country. National branding was successful, and advertising has played an essential role when, in 2004, Poland entered the European Union. Also, in 2012 Poland was one of the European Football Championship organizers together with Ukraine; the Warsaw Stock Exchange became the most important in Central Europe and today the country appears as the crossing point of Europe, where the West meets the East.

Obviously, the promotion of national elements is common in Europe because of the absence of a strong supranational and 'European' identity. As regards Italy, for example, we can mention the commercial for the launch of the new model of Fiat Panda in 2012. Under the claim “This is the Italy we like,” the commercial showed all the values related to the definition of ‘Italianity,’ from art to landscape, through sequences of images in which craftsmen work the marble, glimpses of the main cities of art and, to finish, the vision of the Ferrari factory in Maranello. It is evident that this tendency of turning national identity into a brand will rise soon to support localist tendencies and to forgive the European populations for the sin of globalization.

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